The Wedding March

IN THE modern cathedral the direct city sunshine was tempered by mauve and white windows. Marble of chrysanthemums had been added to the fresh walls. A large gathering was being ushered in and unfolding its elegance in the pews. The organ, restless as blooded horses held in check, preluded.

Hugo Randolph, with his best friend, came out of the vestry and took his place beside the altar. In secret he thought of this as his second wedding, though he had not been married before or even engaged, and the woman who was to that extent his bride's rival was and had been another man's wife. Fifteen years before he had been a hired man on a farm; and it was there, when the farmer and his family were away, pretending to be in

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search of some lost fowl, that she had come to see what he looked like at arm's-length.

Now he felt no regret; he had been a boy... Watching himself closely for his bride's sake, he believed that he was feeling no regret, impatient not only for the ceremony to be over, but for time in general to hasten on with his fortunate middle age, leaving farther and farther behind boyish excitements—ashamed and shameless, solemn, flushing and turning pale, red-eyed, jewelled with drops of sweat. In those days her husband, having bought a little farm, had gone back to bridge-building, leaving her there for months at a time; and he had been unfaithful. Hugo had had no news of her for years.

But how could he forget her—no longer young, languid but healthy, in reddish gingham that first day. A long gaze had been exchanged when his team and her little cart under an umbrella had been stopped side by side at a railroad crossing, and she had come following like a huntress the readiness,

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ignorance, and want which his eyes had revealed. Just out of the heat, under the live olive shadow of the hickory by the barn, she had asked irrelevant questions and he had been inarticulate. There had been a hint of husky storm in her voice and a heaviness and burning thread in the clouded look of her eyes, which had changed shape and pointed at him or at cattle in the yard or at nothing, without, under tangled eyelashes, seeming to move. One hand of a gypsy color with bright finger nails had put a strand of dark hair back. Her shoulders had held her body close and her arms had kept caressing her sides. From the first moment he had had a lump in his throat, a tension which—as if, when spoiled by awareness of itself, innocence became more precious—he had dreaded to have let loose. But he had believed then that what was beginning would never be interrupted, as long as he lived.

In the vestibule of the church he could see the four immaculate children with bou-

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quets, awkward with a sense of responsibility and adornment, watched over by someone until the procession should form.

He would never know how, the very first morning, she had brought about a kiss. Perhaps she had not; perhaps his imagination had added to that day's pang a later comfort. Thereafter, at any rate, at night, on Sundays, upon pretexts of caring for the sheep or hunting for cattle which he had let out of pasture himself, they had met in the hills and the little warm groves. Feeling like impure fugitives until they were out of sight of houses and roads, suddenly each time they had lost track of human ideas; and love, confused with woodland vapors, with amber sunshine, muffled in flowers and branches of berries, had pretended to a virtue of its own —whole-heartedness, heedlessness, Hugo now supposed. She had never feared what might be in the grass, but pressed her cheeks and hands into it, her mouth into the damp moss; and once she had fallen asleep, with

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her feet, like a pair of yellowish blossoms, dabbling in the swimming hole. Naturally word of what was going on had been muttered by neighbor to neighbor, but his employers, three childless cynical pioneers, had had nothing to say so long as he got his work done; and the woman had not cared.

The wedding guests were restless and kept turning their heads back toward the door. The procession was waiting in the vestibule; the bride and her father had telephoned when they left the house, three blocks away. Someone from the vestry door must have mistaken one of the bridesmaids for the bride; the organist had begun to play the march; Hugo and the best man had come in, too soon. Something must have happened to the automobile. Now, in looser and looser variations, the march was being dispelled. Hugo's friend whispered to him.

But he was thinking that a lake had lain between his farmhouse and the house the older woman had lived in. He had tied his

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horse in a deserted barn and gone across in a rowboat; she had come down through a thicket. Lying back in the boat as he had rowed, she had marked the surface of the faint water with her blunt and warm fingers. He had not known what he wanted; only a sort of disorder in his eyes had made the twilight seem to come down on the lake by fits and starts. The warm fingers, still wet, had taught him to let the oars drag, had forced him not to hurry toward love.

He was in no hurry now. How could he tell how many minutes or seconds passed? He and his best man went back into the vestry. He began to feel anxiety, and felt vaguely that he might have brought bad luck upon them all by his recollections, the infidelity of his mind. But now that for a moment he needed something to think about, to pass the time, his youth failed him; he stood absent-mindedly by the vestry door with one hand on the knob. Someone who had been looking down the street ran in, and

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Hugo resumed his place before the attentive pews. There, as if emotion arose from the altar like some unholy evoking stone, the dancing in between present moments by hours of the past—hours of that old summer which were more brilliant and out of breath, even more solemn—began again, to the weak voluptuous march-music.

On a certain morning when the sunlight had been as glossy and leaping as the great horses at play in the barnyard, when the bouquets of fowls on the dungheaps had been like all the bloom in the fields spread out for miles around, having seen his employers go by on the road, she had visited him again. He had washed his hands and cooled off his forehead in the greenish water in the trough. He had given the young bull a drink, and she had caressed its swollen-looking russet head while he had chained it up by the ring in its nose. Then, oh, the cruel straw, and the stirring of that animal with wooden eyes, mahogany eyes, and the per-

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fume of the stone walls, and the wisp of a cat coming and going over their heads—with a veritable rustling of his breath in his haste to expend as much of his life as could be dislodged from the close concentration of forces that youth is, to waste as much as could be wasted . . . But in spite of him the whole of a lifetime had been left on his hands, as he later had found to his sorrow.

There was his bride, down the aisle in the doorway out of which the bridesmaids drew back, in the familiar street which because of the dimness of the church was like a glimpse of an expanse of water, stepping out of a taxicab—thus Hugo knew that in fact it was only the automobile which had failed them—then mounting the steps like a certain amount of white and green foam, guided with one arm by the little expressive wealthy man in formal clothes.

The other woman, emphasizing often the fact of their disparate ages, which incidentally she meant to make use of to set them

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both free—but at the time he had not realized that, loving the man she was married to, she would want to set him free or to be free of him herself—the other woman had often described the girl he ought to seek for a wife: white, young, upon whom he could imprint his character and thus see and learn to know himself, a crystal which would not hide with too much color or mature passion the proper field of man's will-power, man's loveless and ambitious world. Thus it was she who had chosen for him fifteen years in advance the bride who in the vestibule was joining her train.

Then the wedding march started afresh, the blooded horses of the organ given the reins; but they were not swift, it was a sacramental parade not a race, they were almost like those horses in dreams which step and step without advancing. But however slowly, the soft, slight, willing girl was being carried forward by them, as certainly as a sacrifice; a sacrifice to himself and his physical beauty,

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of which for the first time in years it occurred to him to be proud.

He remembered how the other, laughing, had made fun of his youth, his green handsomeness, but paid tribute to it also by the storm of her breath held and let go as they sat and talked of nothing, saying almost nothing herself. And she had cried out angrily one night at the edge of the lake, and cried twice. Both her weeping and her laughter had been as if a fruit could make a sound, smooth and wet. Maybe it was actually true that her kisses had tasted of apples. Her cheeks when wet with tears had felt worn.

He was standing on a little platform, and over the girls' drooping hats he could see his bride's face through the veil, as through some tissue of hoarfrost too early a spring flower, too early in the morning. Past the dew in which his employer sat—that old man was lifting his head with a look of awe or covetousness; and in himself Hugo observed a face like an old man's, reverent and envious,

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lifted, not toward the present since it was in his power, but toward those memories which had come a distance of fifteen years for the occasion.

There was no chronological order in them and no development, as time, that time or this, passed. In the center of them all swirled the same sensuality, cloudy as the provoking glance had been, extravagant as in the beginning. Now he was of an age to acknowledge any physical thing shamelessly, but all the details which were passing through his mind had a color which was equivalent to blushing; or was it only the sorrow inseparable from pleasure, disguised as shame? His passion, though dead and coming back like a ghost, was only nineteen years old.

At last she had given the nineteen-year-old a rendezvous in the sheepfold, a certain sheepfold once a house and still wrapped in lilacs of a Persian color. He had spread a blanket on the springy, musky bales of wool in the loft. The most tranquil of rains had

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fallen on the roof. There he had told her the story of his life. "It is too short," she had complained. "Tell me another—make up one." "Your turn," he had said. Hers had been too long, any woman's life smoothed out; could it have been true? You would have said that his ardor, his youth, which were a luxury, and his hunger to take satisfying her hunger to give, had tamed and fed even the past. Any long life smoothed out by a serenity which made him shiver: he could not keep this pleasure, it did not belong to his age, they were both perishable fruit. . . And his imagination's tasting of death sharpened every other taste; though it was not death which would take her away.

What similarity of cadence and difference of tempo between the approach of his bride in her young rich company to the organ-music (O um di dum! O um di dum!) seemingly so long in arriving from so short a distance, and his remembering—as if the blood flowed in his veins to the same tune.

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but infinitely speeded up and having a dream's fullness of detail. How, between one moment in which he paid attention to the procession and the next, could he make so generous and round about an excursion into the past? It reminded him of bells which had waked him in the morning, one giving the alarm of a fire in his dream and the next sounding from the prow of a boat on its way along a profound river, one, when he was young and without hope of marrying that other woman, becoming the wedding bell toward which they walked knee-deep in roses and the next a death knell and he was left alone; although in either case he could tell by the clock that between the pairs of mechanical alarms not a minute had passed. His mind in sleep wove faster than the springs of any clock; it did now, though he was awake.

Without warning one Sunday she had said, "This is our last afternoon. We've got to say good-bye." Her husband going to Costa

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Rica to work, and she with him . . . "What right has he to ask you to go?" "He isn't asking. He is just letting me go. I may stay if I want to. I am afraid to. I should lose him forever. It is because I love him. You won't understand. He is the master." There had been present then the authority, even the fortitude of a man's spirit (he had been a mere boy); a scrutiny without eyes or making use of her eyes to look at him; and this evidence of a love stripped to the bone, disengaged, which was more vigorous than all their gestures, more habit-forming though less amiable than the darkness and the green-sward. It had not been as a lover that he was most jealous. All the flesh of his body had gone rigid and every vein in it swelled as if it were full of wind; some evil threatened to break out of his eyes, his ears, his mouth. "Hugo, child, have I ever said that I loved you? Do you know that your fists are clenched? You aren't going to strike me——" She had smiled. Then he had

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burst into tears. He had never mentioned love either, but it had not occurred to him that it might not be identical with what they had enjoyed. They had been sitting on a hill on a stone-pile screened by tall, pungent, nervous poplars. He had swayed back and forth, and his tears, running uncontrollably, had made of the sunny landscape under them a vast reddish, greenish gulf. As a last resort he had tried to quarrel with her. And suddenly she had gone, and he had been too hopeless to follow, but almost immediately he had been able to stop crying and wipe his eyes. There she was, walking, running down a lane, through a stubble field, over another hill; she had thrown him a kiss.

Now he heard the brazen organ redouble its effort. Everyone was moving to one side and then standing still. His bride at arm's-length—over some girls' heads he could have touched her. The large notes of the march shrank into the pipes mechanically, like wooden saints in a cathedral clock when the

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hour has struck. Face to face with his blond good fortune; then they too stood shoulder to shoulder. He did not dare lift his eyes. The phrases of sacramental law; question and answer and prayer; the childish but polished hand on his without pressure; the thin, glimmering ring; honor and obey; it was done. The stout, weary bishop gave them his blessing.

They turned, and just as they put down their feet together for the first time, the other music burst forth: a shallow, swaying, almost staggering festival, the march of the "Midsummer Night's Dream," of any common summer dream, under which everyone seemed to bow in humility, with satisfaction; venal-sounding music, out of a world in which all but two are servants.

But Hugo did not stop at once thinking of the other, the third, whom he was glad to have seen go, whose coming and going he was glad to remember. Down the slope and, like a dark bird on foot, across the fields, her

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spirit had left his body, which for a long while had felt dead. In the valley full of sheaves and in his youth immured . . . This day was an Easter for that tomb.

On his arm lay the young wife's hand; against his shoulder tossed the cloud of now purposeless veils; and the flesh of her arms and cheeks and throat looked, he thought, as her drooping, trailing bouquet smelled. For the wedding ceremony, working like some rite of more specific magic, had raised also from the dead, out from under the masonry which in his ambitious, well-disciplined bachelor's heart he had laid to keep it down —love. Love, the repeatedly dead. It would also rise repeatedly, even in the city nights, again and again unprohibited, and be made as before of gold foliage and shepherd's musk, blood-heat and sprinkle of tears. So that his bride's unfriendly purity, like some too early hour of the day, would blush, and her eyes of common forget-me-not blue cloud with a more desirable, animated warmth; for

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it was still midsummer and noon that he loved most in women.

The rest of that long-ago summer and fall, and shorter and shorter memorial periods of the years which followed, had been miserable in the other woman's honor. That idyll like another had been mightier in retrospect than while it had taken place; so much more fleeting are all actions, so much more evanescent the body, than illusions and the mind. Youth is a day during which one cannot keep wide awake, a night during which one cannot sleep, Hugo thought; one has too much imagination at a certain age. The nineteen-year-old filling the hollow of his desire with harvest of pictures, books and others' shamelessness, with memories if he has any (he had had those): a soft whirring of slight machines of flesh, the dimness that rises from a threshing floor, sheaves beaten, choking yellow chaff bit by bit blown away, and at last—it takes too long—the few grains

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of bodily habit separated and gathered up in the grown man's hand . . .

He was glad, grown man in pursuit and in possession of wealth that he was, that mature life afforded less opportunity for thought and more time for doing, which leaves the brain unhaunted, the heart light. But it was a good thing that the woman he was now almost ready to forget had taught him what was the equivalent of long thought about the intoxications that do not originate with drink or drug; about separation which is a working model of death; about the way two truths such as her two unquestionable passions may coincide or overlap; about love in which pleasure has been worn thin or worn entirely away, love dismembered of jealousy and obedience and all question of any change of heart, love that is no less than a destiny by which one soul is doomed to another, in the path of which is rapidly swept aside what a woman may feel for any boy.

By this time he and his bride and the com-

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pany following had come to the door and went happily down into the street and so back to their daily lives. Behind them in the great church whose walls on the inside were the color of a tomb, the organ-music folded about the steps they had all taken and faded away.

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